

TINY HOMES

Austin Tackles Homelessness With a Village of Sustainable Tiny Homes

By Lauren Jones – March 26, 2020

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Local architects from McKinney York explain their schemes for two sustainable models designed to give the formerly homeless a permanent place to call their own.

Homelessness exists in every American city, but in Austin, Texas, the problem seems to be growing. According to the *L.A. Times*, an estimated 2,255 people are homeless in the Texas capitol, representing a 13% increase from 2015 figures. Austin Mayor Steve Adler and Texas Governor Greg Abbott have not been able to reach a solution, or even come to a consensus on how to address the issue. This means the work to help the homeless and keep neighborhoods safe has largely fallen to nonprofits.

One such nonprofit is Community First! Village, a 51-acre master-planned community aimed at offering affordable housing and a safe haven for the chronically homeless. The village comprises two phases: the first will measure 27 acres and include 130 micro-homes; the second will introduce an additional 24 acres and 200 micro-homes. Several local architecture firms have stepped in to contribute designs, some working pro-bono.



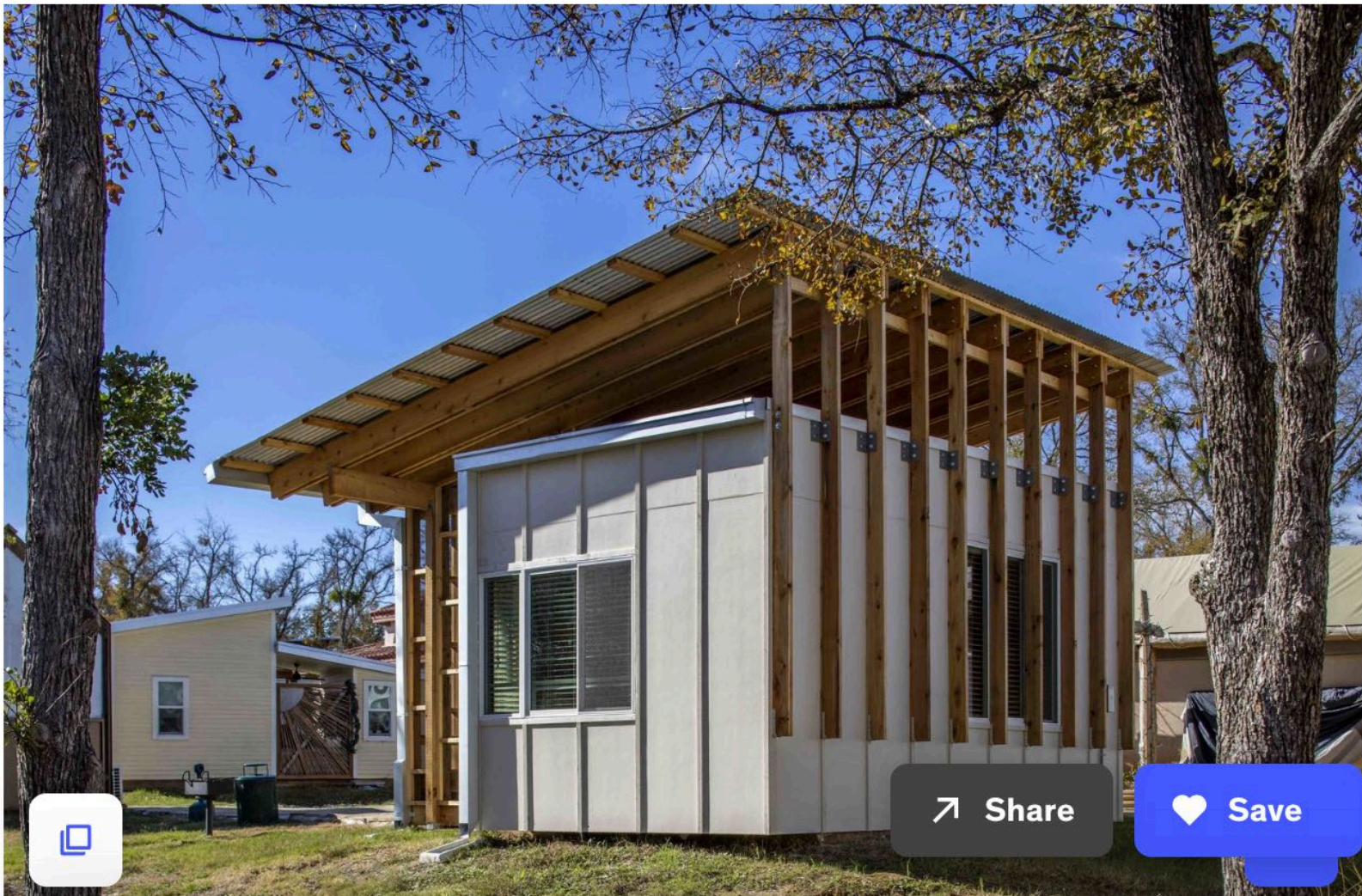
Furthermore, Community First! has anchored itself within the community through partnerships with various businesses, other nonprofits, faith organizations, and local schools, offering its residents opportunities for success in every aspect of their lives.

One such firm, McKinney York, first got involved in 2014 through Tiny Victories 1.0, a design competition held in partnership with the Austin chapter of the American Institute of Architects. McKinney York's founding partner, Heather McKinney, was on the jury and participants were challenged to create something sustainable that would take advantage of the local climate and site, utilize passive heating and cooling, and be made of energy-efficient, cost-effective materials. "It got a lot of interest around town," says Aaron Taylor, an architect at McKinney York. "People wanted to give back to the community."



"The main issue with site planning is the units are relatively dense out there," Taylor says. "The building has to take advantage of sun orientation and seasonal breezes, but also have privacy. This site, in particular, was also next to a swale so there are many insects during the summer months."

Taylor submitted a design independently, and while not chosen, the entire firm eventually got involved approximately six months later. "When the Community First! organizers realized they were going to have a few slabs left, Heather approached them to build pro-bono on one of the leftover slabs," Taylor recalls.



All of the labor and materials to build the homes were graciously donated, meaning that the design couldn't be too extravagant and work well with the given materials. Community First! wanted each home to feel warm and welcoming, but also be relatively maintenance-free.

Thomas McConnell

Photo Categories: exterior, metal roof material, wood siding material, house building type, flat roofline

While McKinney York does do volunteer activities annually as part of its culture, this was the first full project its architects did entirely pro-bono. "In the history of the firm, people have gotten involved with various organizations and boards and have given their professional expertise and design skills in terms of planning," says Navvab Taylor, a project architect at McKinney York.

The first home, which is located in Phase One and was completed in February 2018, was inspired by regional architecture. "There's a thing called an ice house roof here in Texas where you have a larger shade canopy that blocks the sun from the structure and keeps the inside cool by passive means," Aaron Taylor says. But with such extreme temperatures, reaching triple digits nearly all summer long, it's quite difficult to design a 100-percent passively cooled structure in Austin.

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The design also had to allow for both public and private spaces. "A lot of people that have been homeless don't have the luxury of privacy," Navaab Taylor says.

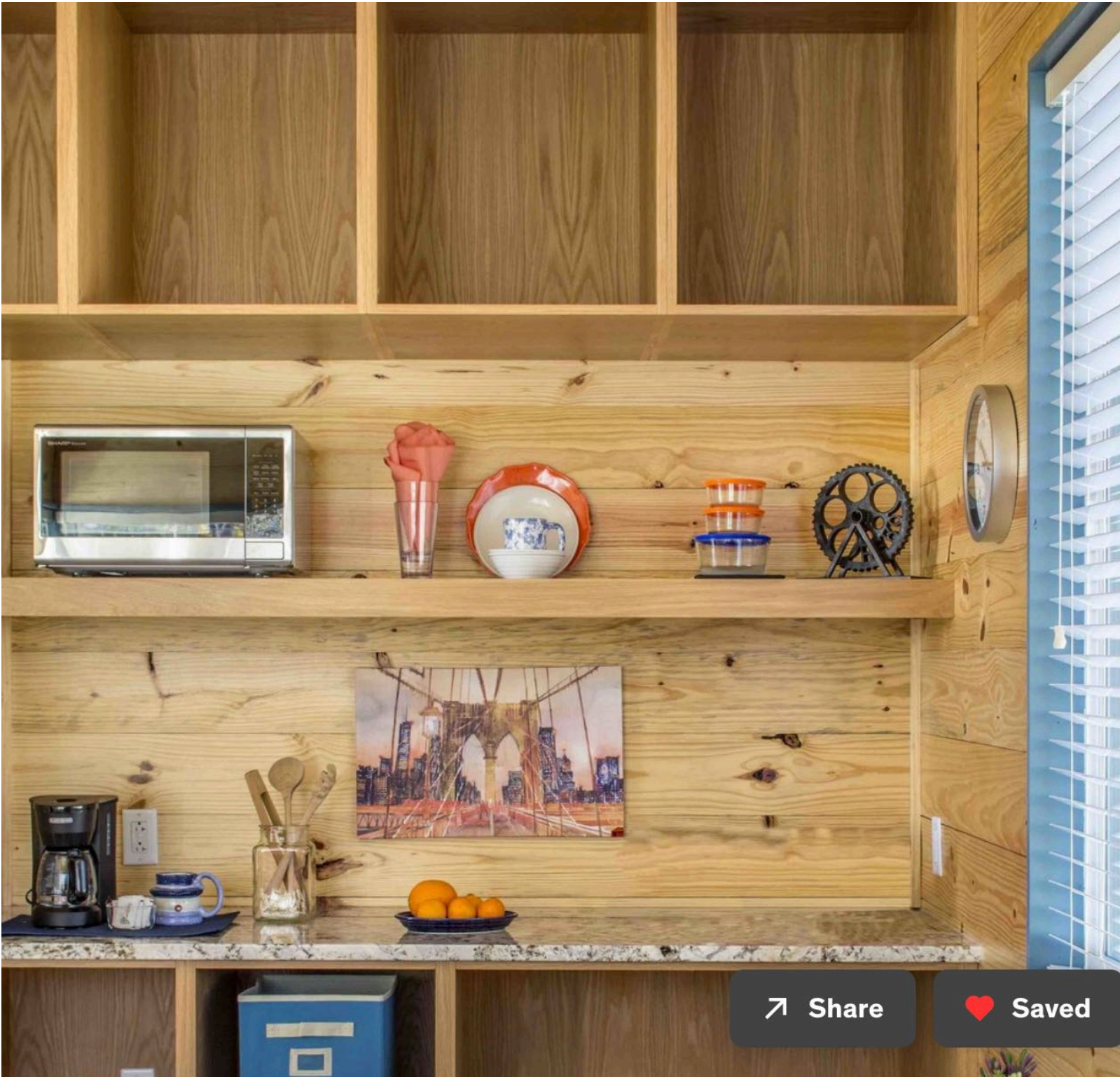
In addition to the obvious weather challenge, Aaron needed to make sure the small structure, which measures about 180 square feet in total (including the porch), would be suitable for those with health concerns. "It's difficult to design a small space because every inch counts for something, but a lot of the residents at Community First! Village have chronic health issues," he says. The design would have to exclude any lofts, ladders, or other space-saving techniques that would be tough for those with disabilities or limited mobility to access.



The interior of the McKinney York micro home is light and cheery with an Eames rocking chair donated by Workplace Resources, shades donated by Austin Shade Works, and throw pillows by Briley's Upholstery Shop.

The interior is roughly 120 square feet and is a single space with a small kitchenette on one end, a storage zone, and a bed. "The kitchenette has no plumbing but has power outlets for a hot plate," he says. There are separate communal bathrooms and kitchens in the community.

After it was completed, that first design became so popular that Community First! asked McKinney York to standardize it to use elsewhere in Phase One.



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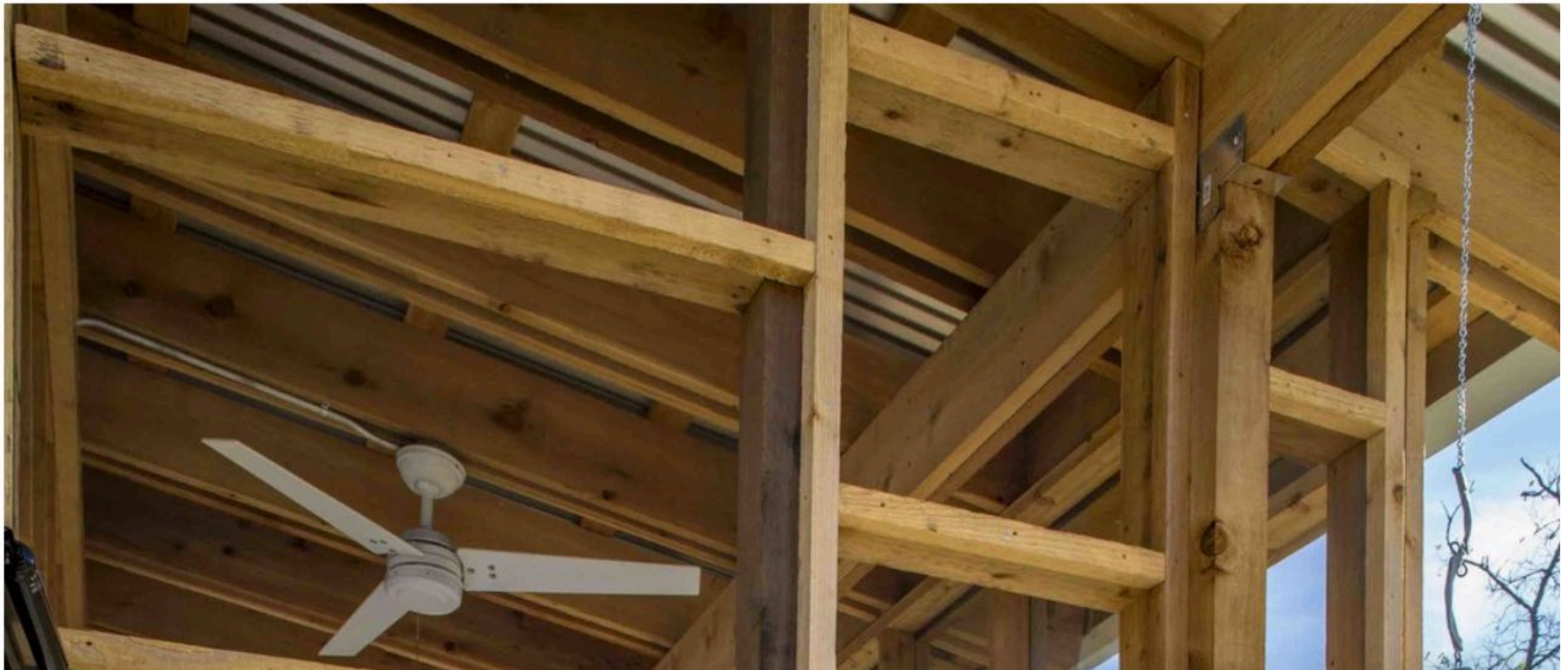
The countertops were all donated and McKinney York added some built-ins to allow for easy storage.

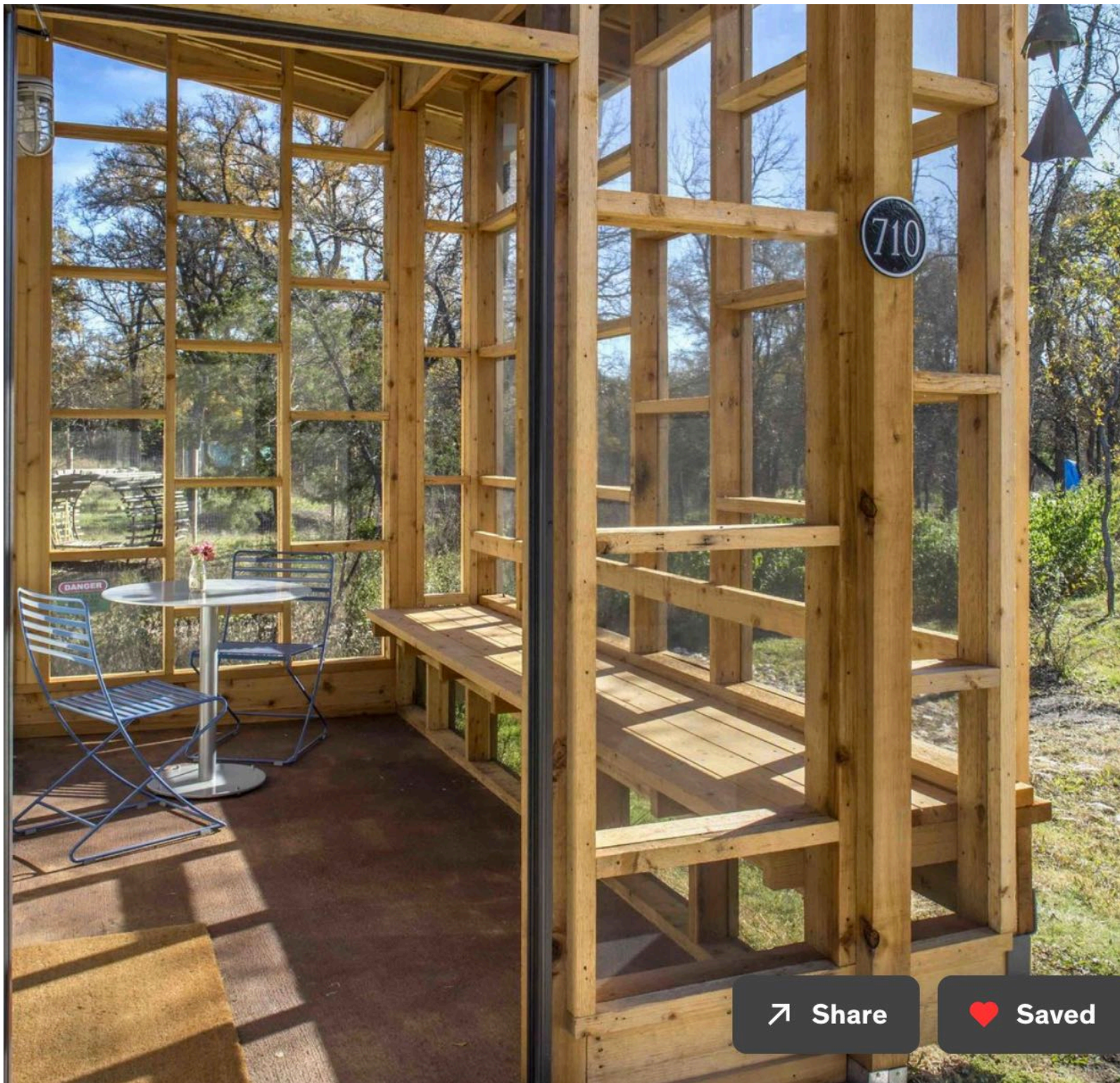
Thomas McConnell

Photo Categories: office, storage, bookcase, chair, study room type, dark hardwood floors

In Phase Two, Navaab Taylor took the lead for McKinney York's second pro-bono project with Community First!. This time, the firm's design was chosen during the second Tiny Victories competition. "We ended up being one of five architect teams invited to design houses for the second phase," she says.

Both homes in Phase One and Phase Two have porches for residents to connect with one another and get some fresh air on a nice day. "The community there all understand what each one is going through on their journeys out of homelessness, so the porch is a really crucial element in the design," Navvab Taylor says. Some of the porches are sided to receive winter sunlight and summer shade. The screened element also keeps out the "awful Texas bugs," she adds.





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The approximately 60-square-foot front porch is the common denominator in all of the Community First! Village micro homes and is one of the main factors that has created such a strong sense of community there.

Thomas McConnell

Photo Categories: outdoor, wood patio, porch, deck, small patio, porch, deck, front yard, trees

Phase Two is currently under construction with many of the 200 micro homes near completion, alongside the kitchen and restroom buildings, support buildings, and a health clinic. McKinney York and their building partner, BEC, who helped with the Phase One home as well, have finished the painting and siding of the home and are expected to finish this spring.

Related Reading: [This 3D-Printed Village Aims to House 40% of Austin's Homeless Population](#)

Project Credits:

Architect of Record: [McKinney York Architects/@mckinneyyorkarchitects](#)